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ABSTRACT

Researchers have found that family involvement in a child's education increases academic success. This study investigated the role of parents in children's education programs. Also examined were how these families perceived their own level of involvement in their child's education. Focus groups composed of African-American family members with children in early childhood special education programs were used to explore these issues. Preliminary results suggest that family involvement depends on the type and degree of communication and contact with school personnel. It was also found that the initial discovery and knowledge of a child's disability can be devastating for parents. Parents must then begin to work through the special education system starting out with little information. Social support, collaboration with school personnel, and availability of community agencies are necessary to help parents in order to enhance and ease the difficulty of raising a child with special needs. Implications for professionals in the field, such as how they can further involve families in their child's education, are also discussed. More investigation into how parents view availability and effectiveness of support is necessary. Contains 24 references. (RJM)

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African-American Family Involvement in Early Childhood Special Education Programs

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Abstract

Research reports that family involvement in their children's education increases the child's academic success. Furthermore, parent involvement has been mandated in this country since 1975 by the Education for all Handicapped Act and its revisions and amendments. Early childhood special education emphasizes that the family is an influential agent in the lives of young children and programs are designed to include family input and collaboration. However, involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse families appears to be lacking. There appear to be many reasons why this is perceived to be the case. Primarily, one must consider that there are many different types of activities, which range from passive to active, in which parents may choose to participate. The present study investigated the perceptions of involvement and the role of parents in children's education programs of African-American family members who have children in early childhood special education. Focus groups were utilized to explore these issues. Preliminary results suggest that involvement depends on types and degree of communication and contact with school personnel, that the initial discovery and knowledge that a child has a disability can be devastating for parents, and that beginning to work through the special education system is made more difficult by the fact that parents start out with very little information. Social support, collaboration with school personnel, and availability of community agencies are necessary to help parents in order to enhance and ease the difficulty of raising a child with special needs. Implications for professionals in the field are also discussed.

African-American Family Involvement in Early Childhood Special Education Programs

Introduction

Family involvement in children's education has been shown to have positive influences on academic achievement (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Harry, 1992). Since 1975, parent involvement has been mandated by the Education for all Handicapped Act (EHA, 1975) and more recently with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1991) which require permission from and inclusion of parents in the decision-making process of placing children in special education programs. For preschool and early childhood special education, this mandate was even more pronounced with the addition of P.L 99-457 (1987) and the provision of Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP). The existence of these laws highlight the fact that families are an extremely influential agent on the lives of young children. Since the passage of these laws, services at school and community agencies for children with special needs has increased drastically along with family support programs (Boyce, Miller, White, & Godfrey, 1995), especially for early intervention and preschool children. However, the degree to which families are involved is often a product of how encouraging schools and their personnel are to parents and families and how readily they incorporate them into school activities (Christenson, et al., 1992; Cervone & O'Leary, 1982). Cultural background may also play a role in the types of activities families choose to engage in and in how the families view participation at school (Harry, 1992). As minority populations in the United States grow, school personnel will be faced with the challenge

to meet the needs of a more diverse student population. The African-American population is increasing 1.5% every year (Harry, 1992). Different cultures view involvement in different ways and family expectations of involvement will affect the degree to which they participate (Harry, 1992).

Families with children with special needs experience unique challenges that other families may not. Everyday stressors are often exacerbated by a child who demands much attention and care. Parents, many times, are isolated from other adults (Swick, 1984), because their children require more attention and energy than children without disabilities. The obstacles these families must face often cause increased sources of stress for families (Swick, 1984). Interestingly, most researchers in the field focus on the deficits and challenges faced by families coping with disability (Summers, Behr, & Turnbull, 1989; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). However, one must remember that raising children with disabilities also brings positive rewards and help family relationships grow (Summers et al., 1989). Further, Turnbull & Turnbull (1990) suggest that the type and severity of disability place different demands on family members, some of which are more challenging to cope with than others.

Summers et al. (1989) define coping skills and resources that are predictive of family success in dealing with children with disabilities. These include problem-solving skills, behavior management skills, communication skills in working with professionals, and family and community social support. The ability of parents to attribute a cause to the disability tends to give some sense of control or predictability to the disability. Being able to have control over something that appears to be overwhelming can also help increase parent's self-esteem and allow them to better adjust and identify strengths in the child and their family.

Summers et al. (1989) also identify the need for social support groups. These groups give families validation of their feelings as well as give them the opportunity to meet others who share similar experiences. Cullen, MacLeod, Williams, & Williams (1991) found that there was a need for greater support for mothers of children with disabilities. Dunst, Trivette, & Cross (1986) also indicated that mothers who have supports report fewer stress-related reactions to their child's disability. For many families, the extended family is one option for a great support network when coping with disability (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). Another important aspect for families is education. This allows the opportunity for parents to learn about the disability, learn about school programs, and learn about their rights in the decision-making process.

Every year, children of all ages are placed in special education programs of one kind or another. Learning is often very difficult for these children for a variety of reasons and they exhibit many different problems. Issues of cultural diversity are especially important at this level of education due to overrepresentation of minority populations in the special education system (Harry, 1992; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Thomas, 1993). Whereas, only 12% of the school population is African-American, 24% of the special education population is African-American (Artiles & Trent, 1994). When one considers that family involvement is a positive influence and that children in special education are in the greatest need of support, family involvement would seem to be especially advantageous for these children.

It is often the view of researchers and school personnel that minority and low income families take less interest in their children's education than the typical American middle class family (Harry, 1992). Christenson,

Rounds, & Gorney (1992) state that all families want their children to be successful in school and that educational and income levels are less influential in determining family involvement than are school and teacher efforts to involve them. Furthermore, Epstein (1992) describes six types of activities which can define family involvement and includes participation which may occur both at home and at school. Cervone & O'Leary (1982) describe family participation as a continuum from passive to active involvement. Therefore, families may not be perceived as actively involved from the school's perspective, but may be involved in many nontraditional or more subtle ways. It is important to understand what a family considers to be adequate participation and involvement in order to make opportunities available for those types of activities to take place. In this way, schools will be able to get full participation from many families. Home-school collaboration is seen as especially important in increasing these opportunities (Christenson et al., 1992; Harry, 1992; Heid & Harris, 1989; Bermudez & Padron, 1988). When school personnel and family members understand the factors playing both at home and at school, an effective working relationship can be formed.

For many culturally and linguistically diverse families, a variety of barriers prohibit active involvement (Harry, 1992; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Mannan & Blackwell, 1992). These barriers include ineffective communication, lack of trust for the school personnel, and inability to get to the school due to lack of transportation, lack of child care for younger children, or lack of finances. Due to these factors, family members may have difficulty becoming involved at the school in traditional ways such as attending PTA meetings and volunteering for work in the classroom or for open houses. However, as Epstein (1992) and Cervone & O'Leary (1982)

stated above, this does not mean that these families are uninvolved. They may be taking more passive routes to involvement in their child's education, however, these should be perceived as just as important as routes which lead to more active involvement.

Specifically, in early intervention programs, families are being faced for the first time with the challenges of the special education process. This is a unique population for which education is set up to support families (Bailey & McWilliam, 1993). Emphasis is placed on the family as the constant factor in the lives of children, the need to recognize family strengths, and the need for flexibility in early intervention programs (Meyer & Bailey, 1993). The underlying focus of the family in early childhood special education programs, therefore, welcomes the idea of family involvement. However, if school personnel do not understand the issues that culturally diverse families are facing, they will not be able to adequately provide services for them and their children. School personnel bring in their own values and beliefs when working with culturally diverse families (Simeonsson & Simeonsson, 1993) and how those professionals explain what is happening in those families will depend on how they view African-American culture, or the culture of any other ethnic group (Thomas, 1993). Therefore, in order to adequately provide services that meet the needs of culturally diverse children and their families, it is essential that school personnel have a working knowledge in the backgrounds of the families that they serve. It is only in this way that appropriate services can be delivered to those families and that the best education possible can be granted to the children.

Purpose of the Study

Family involvement in the education of their children has been shown to have a positive influence on academic achievement. Reported lack of involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse families and the overrepresentation of minorities in the special education system warrants explanation as to what factors are influencing these families and what issues they are facing. While early childhood special education programs strive to emphasize family involvement and develop programs based on the participation of families, it has failed to consider that differences may arise between those from the majority culture and those from diverse backgrounds. Current literature in family involvement focuses largely on the perceptions and expectations based on majority culture values. Families going through the early childhood special education process are also unique, in that, they are being faced with the challenges of the process for the first time and often lack the knowledge going into the program of what is expected of them and what they should expect from the program itself. The present study is unique in that it approaches the issue of family involvement in early childhood special education from the perspective of the family, specifically, the African-American family. The purpose of this study is to better understand the involvement of African-American families in early childhood special education programs and what issues they face during this process. It will specifically explore issues regarded important to the families as they confront the special education process for the first time.

Research Objectives

The following objectives will guide the present study: 1) To gain a better understanding of African-American families' perceptions of their

child's early childhood special education programs; 2) To gain a better understanding of the unique issues faced by African-American families with children in early childhood special education programs; and 3) To better understand the role of African-American culture in family interpretations of their children's education and the nature of their interactions with school professionals.

Methodology

The design and methodology of this study is qualitative in nature. The primary means for gathering information was the use of focus groups which comes largely from marketing research (Morgan, 1993) and is recently being applied in various fields. In the present study, focus groups were used to explore and gain knowledge about the issues related to the early childhood special education process, which African-American family members believe are important to their involvement. This study also addresses how these families perceive their own level of involvement in their child's education program.

Sample

The sample was obtained through purposive sampling techniques, in which the target population, African-American family members with children in early childhood special education, were identified (Morgan, 1993; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The use of purposive sampling allows groups of participants, who share the common characteristics identified as important in the study, to share their viewpoint with the researchers. In focus group research, samples need to be matched to the specific purposes proposed by the study (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

To date, 12 family members have participated in the focus group discussions. Of these parents, while not all women were biological mothers (i.e. foster mother, aunt), 10 were fulfilling the mother role for their children, 2 were fathers (1 biological, 1 foster father). Nine of the parents were married, 3 were single mothers. All children were currently enrolled in an early intervention or preschool program with the exception of two. The parents of these children (ages 8 and 9) either came with a friend with or were bringing a friend with a preschool child. In both cases, the parents were asked to focus their discussion on the time when their child was first placed in special education. Children's ages ranged from 3 to 9 years. The mean age of the children was 5.2 years.

Instrumentation

Focus groups consisted of 1 to 4 family members with a preschool child (3 to 5 years of age) with a disability, who agreed to participate in the study. The response received from the initial contact letter was quite discouraging. Only 10 subjects with preschool children responded. Of this subject pool, when contacted by phone, 3 refused to participate and 1 subject was unable to be reached because of a disconnected phone. Two additional subjects were obtained through those that replied and agreed to participate (e.g. friend or family member). The final four subjects were obtained through another school district in the area with similar demographics. A moderator was responsible for facilitating the discussion according to the interview guide (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The interview guide used in the present study was developed through a process in which various individuals with knowledge on the proposed topic, reviewed possible questions in order to arrive at four initial grand tour questions which were geared to elicit responses relevant to the study. As the focus groups were

conducted it was necessary to add, change, or delete initial questions in order to assure that responses elicited by the questions are relevant to the proposed objectives to the study. In addition, as participants led the discussion, follow-up questions were used in order to clarify or expand on responses made by participants.

Procedure

Prior to implementing the study, researchers went through training geared toward learning qualitative techniques, specifically those utilized in focus group methodology. Practice interviews were conducted with other researchers and then transcribed. The research team also engaged in practice sessions to develop adequate interviewing techniques.

Initial contact letters were sent out to parents in a school district in the southeast who have children in early childhood special education programs, with the help of school personnel. A second contact was then made by phone to family members who replied agreeing to participate. At this time, the study was described and questions of the families were addressed. Demographic information was also obtained. In order to attempt to increase attendance, transportation and child care was provided for participants if necessary. Once focus groups were scheduled, issues of confidentiality were explained and consent was obtained. Consent was also obtained from all participants to audio tape the interviews.

In addition to the audio tape, both moderators took field notes and kept reflexive journals. Field notes included the issues brought up in the focus groups as the participants presented them. Immediately after the focus group took place, moderators recorded their own thoughts about the session in their reflexive journals. The moderator facilitated the discussion based on the interview guide, which consisted of four open-ended questions.

Participants were encouraged to discuss issues they felt were important in their child's early childhood special education programs. Before the session ended, additional demographic information was collected.

Member checks were used throughout the sessions to ensure that responses were being accurately interpreted by the moderators. Peer debriefing and use of multiple researchers were also employed. Immediately after each focus group, moderators discussed their thoughts about the current focus group and what issues they perceived were important for the subjects. The research team also met regularly to discuss major themes which seemed to be appearing and ways in which to ensure that these issues were being covered in the grand tour questions. After each focus group, audio tapes were transcribed by the research team and codes replaced the names of the participants. The names of their children were also changed in order to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, the data was analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This analysis employs the method of modifying questions and hypotheses as new themes emerge and change. Categories were defined by coding the interviews, unitizing the data, and placing each unit on 3 x 5 index cards. Unitizing is used as a method to separate independent parts of the data in qualitative research techniques (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the data collection process, units of information were analyzed and placed into similar categories. As new categories and themes emerged, existing categories, hypotheses, and interview questions were continuously analyzed and modified as needed. Research team member's field notes, reflexive journals, interview transcripts, member checking and

peer debriefing methods were all used as multiple sources of information in the present study. This is termed triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and allows for checks of validity of the themes which emerge. Team members frequently discussed themes which appeared to be emerging from the multiple sources of data and began building hypotheses around them.

Results

Preliminary results have been derived from the 12 subjects interviewed to date. From these subjects, 2,370 units of information have been obtained. These units comprise five major themes (descriptions of home and school, issues of involvement, support, perceptions, and processing variables) elicited from the focus groups. The themes further break down into 13 categories and 82 subcategories. In addition, two miscellaneous subcategories have also developed and will be discussed later.

Processing Variables. The most frequently mentioned theme involved what families must go through when they initially become aware of their child's problem, how this effects their family, and the process they go through in order to cope and deal with the many obstacles they face. This theme deals with this process and includes 3 categories, 28 subcategories, and 781 units of information. The first category deals with initial discovery and knowledge that a problem exists. This includes the child going through testing, getting diagnosed, reaction to this knowledge, quest for a reason behind the disability and how the family is effected. Often this is a scary and fearful time for families, primarily because they know very little about the special education system, what is to happen, and what it means to have a child with special needs. The following quotes capture the overall content of this category.

> I was crushed when I found out....She sent me a letter and that was like the first letter I got from the psychologist and she said Jerome was, like, completely, I mean, mentally retarded, you know, the worst she can say, and that hurt me so bad. It really did. And I just cried and cried and cried and cried.
>
> I don't know what the cause. I don't know what I did.....all of a sudden my child is developmentally delayed and I don't know what I did. They don't hold it against me, so I wonder what I did wrong.
>
> ....so far, there hasn't been a cause.....for a long time I wanted to know why he was the way he was and kept asking every time I went to a doctor, well why this happen, why this happen, why this happen? And then one just said that I might never know why.

The second category involves placing the child in a special needs program. This category deals with the time when families are finding out about the special education process and learning what things need to be done in order for their children to be successful in school.

> I knew with my oldest child that she needed some type special help, but my problem was that I didn't realize where to go. I didn't know who to go to or what, where I could get all this information from, who I can get it from.
>
> And this is where my education started because I never handled no children with these special problems before, hyperactive child, I never handled them before. And it was really educational. I mean, I had to learn quick.
>
> I learned from her sister where to go, who to contact. So, the second child was much easier to work with than the first one. I already knew where to start.

Finally, families must deal with the results of that placement. This category includes the effect the placement has on the child, the treatment of the child by others (other children, school, public), and learning to cope with and modify for the child's problem. It's also a time for families to define what expectations they have for their child and what they can expect from others in the future. The majority of responses revealed positive

effects of the placement and most reported that they saw progress in their children since attending a special education program.

> As far as her ability in school, basically I think by starting out early and because of the special help that she got at an early age, I think that's gonna help her a lot in school to get her so she'll be able to keep up with the other children.

However, negative effects were also addressed.

> .....they label these kids as LD children, ED children, emotional disturbed and learning disability, disabled and that's wrong and when kids are labeled like that they don't want to go to school because kids in regular classes pick at 'em.

Types of Involvement. The second most frequently identified theme consisted of activities in which there was contact between the family/home of the child and the school and/or community agencies. It was comprised of 3 categories (communication issues, school activities, and home activities), 22 subcategories, and 614 units of information. Communication issues emerged as the main area of involvement (11 subcategories, 275 items) for these families. Primarily, parents keep abreast of school activities through phone calls and progress notes. Their main source of communication is the classroom teacher. Meetings (13 items) and home visits (6 items) do exist, however, appear to be much less influential. Communication issues were viewed very positively among most parents. When communication was lacking, parents reported that they would appreciate more information on what things they could do at home to better help their children.

> When you communicate, the two of us communicating together about this child, that is really good. The child's behavior won't be so bad if you let them know you're communicating with the parents. They won't give you such a hard time and anything unusual, you know, really it's communication.

> ...working with the teacher and I doin' my job at home, we can watch him through that year. Communication plays a big part.
>
> And you really feel comfortable with them and you feel you can trust them because they're not lying to you, you know, they're telling you exactly what's goin' on.

The subcategory entitled home activities (205 items) included what parents saw as their role in their child's education, what type of activities they participated in outside of school that related to their child's education and how they and their children reacted to that involvement. At the preschool level, parents saw as their primary role to provide their children with knowledge and skills that would meet their basic needs so that they will be able to function more independently in the future. They also felt that they were advocates for their children and it was their job to ensure that their children received the best education possible.

Parents also reported that they participated in activities at the school (134 items). This included attending IEP meetings, visiting the classroom, attending after school programs or field days, and connecting with community resources. Overall, it appeared that in order to be actively involved in the school setting, parents needed to volunteer their services. Although parents are generally satisfied with their involvement, they feel they are responsible for initiating it in many cases.

> (In response to: What is your job in [your child's] education?)
> To make sure that they get the best education that they can get...I want them to get the best that they can get and I don't want them to fall through the cracks....She's entitled to that. I want to be there whenever I'm needed, I'm gonna be there to see that she get this education...I think that if something is going wrong, I'm gonna raise hell because I know that it shouldn't be like that and if anything's goin' wrong, I'm gonna speak up and if they need me for anything, I'll be right there for them when they need me and I may be right there when they don't need me. But, I want to make sure she gets a good education. I want to make sure she'll be able to function on her own when that time comes...

> I have a good relationship, I guess because I'm the type parent that because I know my children are in special education, I want to make sure that they're not being pushed aside or anything. So, I'm constantly in contact with the school at all times. Everybody knows who I am because I'm there. I want to know what's goin' on in the classroom, you know, even if they can't sit down, let me know so that I can train them at home to sit down. If there's something that they need extra help in, let me know so that I can help them, and I'm like that...
>
> (In response to: What can the school do to help you be involved with you children?)
> I think mainly it's just because I want to be.
>
> You have to train your child at home before you send them to school, 'cause the teacher can not do that...

Descriptions of home and school. This theme was comprised of 3 categories (school descriptions, family descriptions, and child descriptions), 13 subcategories and 530 units of information. Overall content of the theme revolved around basic descriptions of school and family make up and child's behavior and characteristics. The most frequently mentioned category included child descriptions which consisted of child's behavior at school and at home, academic descriptions, and description of child's general characteristics and personality traits. Description of child's behavior at home contained 217 units of information. While child's behavior was a main concern for these parents, cautions are in order. One parent, for whom behavior was an extreme problem, contributed almost half of these items (101). However, this subcategory was still the most frequently mentioned, and therefore, deserves attention. The second most frequent subcategory included descriptions of the subject's families (83 units of information) and fell under the category of family issues. This subcategory included describing members of the family and living situations. The final category included descriptions regarding the make up of various aspects at school. This consisted of what personnel work with

the child, make up of the IEP meetings, and classroom characteristics of the child's education program.

Individuals perceptions of others. This theme was comprised of 3 categories (parent's perceptions, school's perceptions, and child perceptions), 12 subcategories, and 246 units of information. This theme focuses on how the parent, school, and child view the other aspects of the system in which they are working. The first category deals with the perceptions parents have of the school, its personnel, and it's resources. Overall, parents seem to have positive views of the school and its personnel. However, when one gets a hold of bad teachers or schools, the children are the ones that are effected. Much respect is given to those teachers and schools which care about the children. It is also seen as extremely important to get good teachers. Parents report that when their child has a good teacher, positive results are seen throughout the year.

> And, I love it, 'cause you see these people that are specialized or are in certain areas for our children, these are good people, you got to be some special people to go into a field that is for pediatrics...I just love them.
>
> If I didn't have them, I don't know what I would have done. This child probably be handicapped, sitting in a corner. I don't know. And me, probably wouldn't have any help, 'cause I filled all the spots in my head trying to figure what to do with the child.
>
> I'm really thrilled with what's going on....there is a lot for someone who cares. The do, they care about 'em. They really do.
>
> These are some special teachers. I know I can speak for everybody here at the primary, they are very special.

Two other categories appear to be emerging and it will be important to follow up with these categories in future focus groups. These are the perceptions of the child and the school. Children are perceived by their parents to enjoy the programs they are in overall. They also are reported to

understand what is going on around them and appreciate what parents and teachers do to help them. Overall, schools are seen as wanting parents to volunteer their help in the classroom and appreciate the close contact with the parents. While most parents report that they are satisfied with the level and type of involvement they have with the school and perceive the school in a positive light and feel that the school perceives them in a positive light, there seems to be some disagreement. This may have to do with the level of trust and comfort the parent feels within the school, however, this needs further examination in future focus groups.

Support. This theme was described in one category, 8 subcategories, and 146 units of information. The overall content of this theme dealt with the help that parents and children receive from various agents. Support is seen as a need which facilitates parents who are working through the special education process and learning to cope, however, there also seems to be a lack of availability of support for many families (e.g. support groups). Families who do report that they are receiving support seem to be getting this from other family members and concerned personnel at school and other community agencies. Parents also report that support from others helps them in dealing with the many obstacles that they face every day. This theme also needs further examination as it is still emerging.

> (It seems like having that support is so important)
> That's right, when you have somebody to talk to and it's a difference when you have someone tell you the reason why a child is going through this.
>
> ...so, really there is a lot of help out there for those children and there's a lot of support and there's a lot of them that care. You just got to get to the right people.
>
> I was gonna seek out, you know, was there a support group with children with special needs. I would love to get involved in something like that, because it helps.

One subcategory that starts to emerge is the unique contribution of the fathers. However, due to limited participants at this time, this area will be explored as the study progresses.

Discussion

The present study examined the perceptions of African-American families' of their child's early childhood special education programs, the unique issues faced by these families, and the role that African-American culture plays in family interpretations of their children's education and the nature of their interactions with school professionals. This was obtained by utilizing qualitative research methodology (e.g. focus groups) and allowing family members to lead discussions on issues they felt were important to their experiences in the special education process. At the level of early intervention, it was assumed that the first time families go through the special education process, many obstacles and stressors are faced that family members have never had to face before. Further, while literature tends to perceive culturally and linguistically diverse families as less involved, it was hypothesized that the families who participated in this study were concerned about their children and may be involved in their education in various different ways, both traditional and nontraditional, active and passive.

The present study did suggest that families are learning to cope with the knowledge of having a young child with special needs. For many parents, knowledge of this was extremely devastating. Many parents feel guilty or that they must have done something wrong to make their child this way. Other family members, at first, deny that there is a problem. Effective coping skills and acquiring education are essential qualities that help ease the devastation felt by these families (Summers et al., 1989). The

families who participated in this study are just beginning to work through this process. However, professionals can help families cope and learn by being sensitive to their perspectives and providing knowledge and explanation about what to expect as time passes as much as possible.

The families who participated in this study were not lacking in involvement activities as might be expected by the literature (Harry, 1992). Consistent with work by Epstein (1992) and Cervone & O'Leary (1982), family members perceived their involvement on many different levels. They saw their role as one of making sure that their children were equipped with the basic skills necessary to function independently later in life. They also felt it was their responsibility to ensure that their children received the best education possible. It was made clear they felt that the fact that their children had disabilities should not hinder their education. Parents were willing to do most anything possible to make sure that level of education was achieved. Many times this included doing whatever the school asked and watching activities at school to make sure all personnel did their children justice.

Communication was also viewed as a form of involvement in this study. It plays a role in many different areas of these families lives and is seen as the most effective way that parents and school personnel can work together to benefit the child. Summers et al. (1989) point out that good communication can help ease the stress many families face when meeting with professionals who are trying to help their child. Professionals need to make themselves open to parents for questions and support. They can try to help parents understand the cause for their child's disability or help them accept that they don't know what is the cause. It will be important to continue to analyze issues of communication and involvement in future

studies. While they overlap considerably and were considered under one theme at the present time, communication is seen as extremely important to families and may begin to emerge as a separate theme. Another area under involvement which may begin to emerge are differences in active and passive involvement activities. Cervone & O'Leary (1982) suggest that these involvement activities fall on a continuum. Passive involvement may consist of reporting and receiving information from the school through notes or phone calls. More active involvement requires that parents participate more as agents of teaching by attending workshops, meetings at the school and providing input into decision-making. At what level parents choose to participate may be a function of lack of trust or comfort, lack of transportation, life situations, or financial difficulties (Harry, 1992; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Mannan & Blackwell, 1992). All must be considered by professionals working with these families. As more focus groups are conducted, this will be an interesting area for further analysis.

While it is not clear at this time how descriptions of family living situations, children's behavior, and school and family make up fit into the present study, it is important to note that parents are concerned about their child's behavior. Although, at this time the subcategory might have been inflated by one participant who is dealing with a variety of behavioral issues, this was still the most frequently mentioned subcategory. This finding may have implications for professionals and relate to communication issues as well. Parents who are dealing with children with challenging behaviors, especially for the first time, may need suggestions on behavior intervention techniques and parenting skills. Often professionals see that their role is to make parents aware of the problem, but then professionals leave and parents are left on their own to

figure out how to best cope with the situation. Giving parents effective strategies to begin tackling the problem helps them gain a sense of control over the situation and enhances self-esteem (Summers et al., 1989). Pointing out a family's strengths can also prove beneficial when working with families. The skills parents receive from professionals can empower them to become actively involved in understanding and providing for their child's special needs (Dunst, Trivette, Davis, & Cornwell, 1988).

Home-school collaboration has gained a great deal of recent attention in the literature (Christenson et al., 1992; Harry 1992). In the present study, it appears important to enhance involvement and effective communication. In order to achieve a positive and effective relationship, these two systems, along with the child, make up a larger system in which all are functioning. As stated above, trust and openness must be acquired in order for this relationship to occur. Therefore, the perceptions of members of each system (i.e. home, school) towards the other members of the system is extremely important to consider. While this study looks at parent's perceptions, it is interesting to investigate how they think the children and school personnel are viewing their activities. This may also determine the level and type of involvement they choose. Christenson, et al. (1992) suggest that what is important in determining the level of parent involvement are the efforts made by the school and teachers to encourage involvement. Cervone & O'Leary (1982) also acknowledge the fact that level of involvement of parents also depends on how ready teachers are to receive help from parents and what activities they provide. In future focus groups, questions as to how parents view this readiness from the school and what activities the school expects from them may help determine if this is in fact

the case. The way the child views the collaboration between parents and school may also be an important factor in defining this overall system.

Finally, more investigation into how parents view availability and effectiveness of support is necessary. This is supported extensively in the literature (Summers et al., 1989; Dunst et al., 1986; Cullen, et al., 1991; and Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990) and is an emerging theme from the participants in the present study. It will be important to explore where participants receive support and where they feel support is lacking. Developing effective support networks will be important for families as they work through the special education process. It is also important for school personnel as they strive to provide education for children with special needs. Support groups appear to be one area of support that is lacking for these families. It will be necessary to determine why this is the case. It may be a result of parents not knowing how to get in contact with agencies that do provide this outlet of support. If so, professionals need to become aware that this is a need that is not being met and help families learn about where to go for this type of support.

Finally, there are still issues which do not fit into the above discussion and warrant further research. One of these is how fathers view their experiences as unique to the special education process at the early childhood level. As more fathers participate, this area will be investigated. Data will also continue to be analyzed and new emerging themes targeted.

The implications for this study seem to be great. Participants have greatly appreciated the chance to share their views with the researchers. This emphasizes the fact that sensitivity and opportunity for communication is effective and important for involvement of families. It is especially warranted when working with families from culturally and

linguistically diverse backgrounds in order to better understand their perceptions and expectations of the special education system. Knowing how to provide support, communication, and opportunity for education about disabilities and raising children with special needs for families with different cultural values is important in enhancing the education of these children. Family members want to be involved. They want their children to succeed. The challenge for professionals is creating opportunities for families to participate which are sensitive to their backgrounds and allow them to feel like important agents for their child's education.

*NOTE: This paper represents data based on preliminary results. Anticipated submission for publication for this manuscript is in Fall 1996.

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